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Zakenvrouwen. Over de grenzen van vrouwelijkheid in Nederland sinds 1945.

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Summary

In all cultures human physiology is the raw material for social categorizations that determine modes of thought, perceptions of the world, social institutions and daily practices. Taking the human body as a basis, the social-cultural categories of 'women' and 'men' are constructed. Anthropology could be the outstanding science to study the process by which physiological differences between women and men are transformed into cultural symbols. Since Margaret Mead's abolishment of the real, that is to say universal, femininity and masculinity in 1935, much anthropological material has been gathered to show us the many different forms of femininity and masculinity. However, the acknowledgement of the great variety in the cultural creations of 'the small difference' did not lead to a real relativization of this difference. Both Mead and the feminist anthropologists of the early seventies stressed the need to disconnect physical features and social behaviour. Nowadays this disconnection is explained by using two different terms, namely 'sex' and 'gender'. Whereas 'sex' indicates two types of people that can be distinguished by physical features, 'gender' is about the social and cultural meanings of femininity and masculinity. The use of the term 'gender' makes it clear that biological determinism is rejected.

In this book three different aspects of 'gender' are distinguished: 'gender symbolism', 'gender structure' and 'gender identity'. Nevertheless, all three aspects are connected in a sex-gender system. The sex-gender system gives individual women and

men a view of the world and it also offers opportunities to them to act within it. This offer is not completely optional. The sex-gender system contains models for the most fitting behaviour of individual women and men, although it does not determine this behaviour. Cultural notions of femininity and masculinity set the social boundaries in which individual women and men can operate. But these boundaries are not fixed. There are always possibilities to escape, whether they are sanctioned or not, for individuals or groups who do not (want to) adapt. If one wants to gain insight into the interpretation and effect of the sex-gender system in the Netherlands, doing research among individuals who have encountered these boundaries may offer the best chance. That is why I have chosen to study female entrepreneurs.

Recently female entrepreneurs in different regions have been the object of much research. The exceptional position of female entrepreneurs is the starting-point in all studies. In most countries female entrepreneurs are a minority when compared with male entrepreneurs. Most researchers consider this minority position as the main problem and try to determine its causes. This is why the impression is created that female entrepreneurs are a group of entrepreneurs with a specific handicap: their sex. Next, the research is aimed at describing the problem and determining the difference of female entrepreneurs when compared to normal (= male) entrepreneurs. However, women and men are not two contrasting homogeneous groups at all places and all times. If social scientific researchers see them this way, they have no eye for the differences between women and men, nor for their similarities. Furthermore, when we consider studies on female entrepreneurs, there is a danger of posing the wrong problem. The female entrepreneur or female entrepreneurs as a group are not the problem, but the cultural system in which they have to function. If female entrepreneurs are not defined anymore as the main problem, we will create room to examine their experiences and ideas. And by describing these we can gain some insight into the cultural mechanisms that make their lives difficult.

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Female entrepreneurs in different regions have been the subject of much research. The exceptional position of female entrepreneurs is the starting-point in all studies. In most countries female entrepreneurs are a minority when compared with male entrepreneurs. Most researchers consider this minority as the main problem and try to determine its causes. This gives the impression that female entrepreneurs are entrepreneurs with a specific handicap: their sex. Research is aimed at describing the problem and determining the difference of female entrepreneurs when compared with male (= male) entrepreneurs. However, women and men are two contrasting homogeneous groups at all places and times. If social scientific researchers see them this way, they lose sight of the differences between women and men, and of their similarities. Furthermore, when we consider studies on female entrepreneurs, there is a danger of posing the wrong problem. The female entrepreneur or female entrepreneurs are not the problem, but the cultural system in which they have to function. If female entrepreneurs are not determined by the sex-gender system as the main problem, we will create room to exchange experiences and ideas. And by describing these we can gain insight into the cultural mechanisms that make entrepreneurship difficult.

This book has two purposes. In the first place I want to offer a platform to (a group of) women talking about their experiences with and ideas about femininity and entrepreneurship. Through their stories I want to show how female entrepreneurs have lived their lives. Secondly, I want to gain insight into the interpretation and effect of the sex-gender system in the Netherlands in a specific period by looking at these individual stories. Individual women and men are constantly confronted with an existing sex-gender system in which they have to shape their lives. At the same time the sex-gender system is expressed in the life of an individual. In other words, individual women and men are the products of the sex-gender system and at the same time they are its creators. Since we can consider the individual as the whole of the social-cultural relations, individual descriptions can be used as a way to obtain a clear view of the sex-gender system in a specific period. Besides describing the life-stories, I have also studied the activities and opinions of an organization of female entrepreneurs, namely the 'Unie van Vrouwelijke Ondernemers Nederland'. The twenty-seven life-stories and the material on the Unie are to be seen as two different ways of looking at the main question of this research: how have entrepreneurship and femininity been made compatible in the Netherlands after 1945?

In my book I do not use the stories I collected to explain social cultural patterns, but to show how a specific group of women in a specific historical period has lived their lives. However, I do not stop there. By reading their stories closely and using the concept of the sex-gender system, I also try to gain insight into the reasons why these stories are told in this specific way. Both with respect to the life-stories and the material on the Unie I posed the following questions. What happens to a woman when she chooses for entrepreneurship? What practical solutions does she have for the combination of her work inside and outside the home? Does she lose her femininity, wanted or ascribed to her by culture, as a consequence of her choice of a 'male' occupation? Does she become some 'kind of man' in the eyes of others, the well known 'honorary male'? Does she escape the

images of femininity that exist? Or does she stick to them in some way or another, for example, by subjecting her entrepreneurship to the accepted image of femininity? Or does she create some sort of third gender category for herself and for others, a category that stands in between woman and man?

In the chapters 5 and 6 I show how female entrepreneurs in the Netherlands after 1945 have lived with the contradiction between entrepreneurship and femininity. The mere existence of 45,000 to 55,000 female entrepreneurs is of course in itself already the proof of the fact that women and business can go well together. Still, for the last forty years the 'Unie van Vrouwelijke Ondernemers Nederland' has been justified by the necessity to prove this. Women and business can go together, but the combination is not an obvious one. In the first place there is the idea that women cannot be good entrepreneurs. Secondly there is the idea, especially in the fifties and the sixties, that businesswomen are not real women. Female entrepreneurs are confronted with both normative statements. In the individual life-stories and in the history of the Unie the concern for 'being a woman' and especially for 'staying a woman' is always present. Female entrepreneurs are indeed, as many people told me, 'normal' entrepreneurs. 'Normal' in the sense that they keep their businesses going by working hard, keeping an eye on their finances and innovating and taking risks at the right moments. At the same time female entrepreneurs are women in a society that has a specific sex-gender system. Within this system femininity has a certain meaning and the division of labour according to gender assigns all responsibility for material and emotional care to women. The meaning of femininity and the responsibilities of women are in some ways incompatible with the image of 'the' entrepreneur and the great dedication that is required for running a business. This incompatibility is the real problem that female entrepreneurs are confronted with.

There are different ways in which female entrepreneurs solve the problem of the incompatibility. One of the ways individual women use is by creating an image of themselves as some kind of businesswoman 'by chance' in their story. Many women

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mention a feeling of obligation, respect for the family tradition
or feelings of piety towards the life-work of a died husband as
their main motives for becoming a businesswoman. Some wo-
men say they did not deliberately choose for entrepreneurship
and call their business 'a grown-up hobby'. Especially women
of the pre-war generation stress how their entrepreneurship was
not the result of a deliberate choice but of circumstances. Many
of them stress the coincidental nature of their entrepreneurship,
as if they want to diminish its importance at the same time. The
younger women, who grew up in the forties and the fifties stress
that it often was a deliberate choice to become an entrepreneur.
They mention motivations like the wish to prove themselves
and the recognition of a right to explore their own possibilities.
It is in the way female entrepreneurs speak about themselves
that they create a certain self-image. The older women talk
about entrepreneurship as some kind of serving. They stress the
ways in which they could help others by their business. In the
texts of the Unie entrepreneurship is also seen as a way of ser-
ving the general good. Female entrepreneurs are presented as
responsible and worthy members of society who do not waste
their talents, but use them to serve others. Through this image
female entrepreneurs 'feminize' entrepreneurship and in this
way they succeed in being businesslike and staying a woman at
the same time. This is how they make the contradiction worka-
ble. They redefine meanings of femininity and entrepreneur-
ship and they meddle with social divisions of labour. They
stretch the boundaries of symbols and responsibilities until fe-
mininity and entrepreneurship can be made compatible. There
is only one boundary they leave untouched: the boundary be-
tween women and men. They are born in female bodies; this is
what makes them women and they want to stay that way.